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GREENE'S *FRIAR BACON AND FRIAR BUNGAY*

The "disputation" in the ninth scene of *Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay* seems at first glance to be merely a humorous piece of magic carrying on the tradition of the celebrated magician's power. There is evidence, however, which points to a satire on one of the most famous of the many foreign visitors to Oxford in the last quarter of the sixteenth century. I refer to Giordano Bruno.

In 1583 Bruno came to London, and during April, May, and June of that year was at Oxford. Without attempting to make sweeping condemnation of certain traits of this philosopher, we may notice that he was egotistical, very fond of public disputes, and very confident in regard to his own ability. His letter asking for permission to lecture at the University is typical of his self assurance: "To the most Excellent the Chancellor of the University of Oxford, its most famous Doctors and celebrated Masters—Salutation from Philotheus Jordanus Brunus of Nola, Doctor of a more scientific theology, professor of a purer and less harmful learning—known in the chief universities of Europe, a philosopher approved and honorably received, a stranger with none but the uncivilised and the ignoble, a awakener of sleeping minds, tamer of presumptuous and obstinate ignorance, who in all respects professes a general love of man, and cares not for the Italian more than for the Briton, male more than female, the mitre more than the crown, the toga more than the coat of mail, the cowed more than the uncowed; but loves him who in intercourse is the more peaceable, polite, friendly, and useful—(Brunus) whom only propagators of folly and hypocrisy detest, whom the honorable and the studious love, whom noble minds applaud." Permission was granted him, and he began a course of lectures on the immortality of the soul and the "Five-Fold Sphere."

Another visitor at Oxford during the month of June, 1583, was the Polish prince, Alasco, in whose honor were given banquets and disputations. Bruno was among the disputants; according to his own account (*Cena*, Fourth Dialogue) the opponent put forward by the University could not reply to even one of his arguments, and was left fifteen times by as many syllogisms floundering like a

“hen in the stubble,” resorting finally to incivility and abuse. The foreigner’s prowess, however, did not meet with the approval of the authorities, and he was forced to discontinue his lectures. For the next two years he was in London, and claimed to have been intimate with Greville, Sidney, Dyer, and Temple. With the first of these he ultimately severed friendship,—“the invidious Erinyes of vile, malignant, ignoble, interested persons had spread poison”—perhaps Bruno’s abuse of the London learned was the real cause of the break.

One more point about Bruno is necessary. He was connected in some indefinite capacity with the French Embassy. Writing of his connection with the Ambassador, Bruno has this to say: “In his house I stayed as a gentleman, nothing more.” Whatever his duties were, he was on intimate terms with the Ambassador Mauvissière, and in his company went frequently to Court, was introduced to Queen Elizabeth, and formed the acquaintances mentioned above.

That Greene knew of Bruno is beyond question, since in 1583 the dramatist had taken his Master of Arts at Cambridge. The stir that such a character as Bruno made could not have escaped the notice of the alert Greene.

The scenes of *Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay* in which Vandermast, the magician, appears, will be recalled. In the seventh scene, Mason, Burden, and Clement tell of the preparations for the reception of the foreign dignitaries, and the necessity of suitable spectacles.

Clement. . . . the king by letters hath foretold
That Frederick, the Almain emperor,
Hath brought with him a German of esteem,
Whose surname is Don Jacques Vandermast,
Skillful in magic and those secret arts.

Mason. Then must we all make suit unto the friar,
To Friar Bacon that he vouchsafe this task,
And undertake to countervail in skill
The German; else there’s none in Oxford can
Match and dispute with him.

And so the stage is set for the coming of the disputatious “German,” whose name, we notice, is a mixture of Spanish, French, and German (Dutch).

In scene nine the foreign kings enter in company with King Henry, Elinor, Vandermast, and Bungay. The Emperor praises

the site and learning of Oxford, and refers to Vandermast for his opinion.

Vandermast. That lordly are the buildings of the town,
Spacious the rooms and full of pleasant walks;
But for the doctors, how that they be learned,
It may be meanly for aught that I can hear.

Bungay champions the learning of the University, and the dispute is on.

Vandermast. Wherein dar'st thou dispute with me?

Bungay. In what a doctor and a friar can.

Vandermast. Before rich Europe's worthies put thou forth
The doubtful question unto Vandermast.

Bungay. Let it be this, Whether the spirits of pyromancy or geomancy be most predominant in magic.

Vandermast. I say of pyromancy.

Bungay. And I, of geomancy.

Vandermast maintains that, as the sun "in the compass of ascending elements" is above the other planets, the "daemones" dwelling in the highest orb must be superior to the rest. They debate at some length, but being unable to settle the dispute by words, they agree to conjure up the most amazing apparition they can and to decide the contest on the merits of the apparitions. Bungay causes to appear the golden tree of the Hesperides guarded by a dragon shooting fire. But Vandermast is not to be outdone. At his bidding, Hercules, in his lion's skin, enters and tears off the branches of the tree. Bacon, however, is yet to be reckoned with. At a sign from him, Hercules ceases his destruction and in spite of the commands of Vandermast refuses to act against the will of the master magician. The German is now the vanquished, and in disgrace is carried back to Hapsburg by the very giant he had ordered to appear.

The reader of the *Cena* will notice certain resemblances between Vandermast's depreciatory remarks about the Oxford doctors, the subjects discussed in the play, and Bruno's strictures of Oxford and the scientific disputes. I call attention to the opening conversation of the *Cena*, which is to be considered as following the dispute between Bruno and the English disputants.

Smith. Did they speak a good Latin?

Teofilo. Yes.

S. Were they gentlemen?

T. Yes.

S. In good standing?

T. Yes.

S. Learned?

T. So-so.

S. Well brought up, polite?

T. Just moderately.

S. Doctors?

T. Yes, sir! Yes, by Zeus, I verily believe of Oxford.

S. Were they imposing scholars?

T. Indeed! Gentlemen in splendid long robes, clothed in velvet; one of them with two gold chains about his neck, and another, with his expensive hand, showing on two fingers alone a dozen rings, seemed like a rich jeweler. He dazzled my eyes when he moved his hand.

S. Did they show any taste for Greek?

T. For Greek? Much more for Beer!

S. How else did they strike you?

T. One looked like a policeman of the giants, the other like a door-keeper of the Goddess of Respectability.

The dialogue is indicative of the general trend of Bruno's remarks against the English. Not only are the learned ridiculed, but the very bargemen for failing to live up to their bargaining, the people for their bad manners, and the city for its muddy streets are butts for the Italian's criticism. The very comprehensiveness of his rebukes, not to mention the humor and incisiveness, demanded an answer.

In the Fourth Dialogue Bruno explains the relative positions of the planets, and in the next dialogue continues the argument. His opinion, he states, was shared by Heraclitus, Democritus, Epicurus, Pythagoras, Parmenides, Melissos, all of whom, furthermore, conceived of an infinity in which the planets circulated; these they called "aethria," which Bruno explains as "runners," "couriers," "messengers of the kingdom of Nature"; each has its principle of motion, its soul and peculiar intelligence. Of the elements, fire, resident in the sun, is the greatest, since it can penetrate earth, air, and water. This discussion is continued at great length. Compare the following speech of Vandermast:

The cabalists that write of magic spells,
As Hermes, Melchie, and Pythagoras,
Affirm that, 'mongst the quadruplicity

Of elemental essence, terra is but thought
 To be a punctum squared to the rest;
 And that the compass of ascending elements
 Exceed in bigness as they do in height;
 Judging the concave circle of the sun
 To hold the rest in his circumference.
 If then, as Hermes says, the fire be greatest,
 Purest, and only giveth shape to spirits,
 Then must these daemones that haunt that place
 Be every way superior to the rest.

In the "*Famous Historie of Fryer Bacon*" there is an account of "How Fryer Bacon overcame the German conjurer, Vandermast, and made a spirit of his owne carry him into Germany." The chapter telling of this feat mentions that the "King of France sent an Ambassadour to the King of England for to entreat a peace between them. This Ambassadour being come to the King, he feasted him (as is the manner of princes to do) and with the best of sports as he had then, welcomed him. The Ambassadour, seeing the King of England so free in his love, desired likewise to give some taste of his good liking, and to that intent sent for one of his fellowes (being a German, and named Vandermast) a famous conjurer, who being come, hee told the King, that since his Grace had been so bountiful in his love to him, he would shew him, by a servant of his,¹ such wonderful things that his Grace had never seene the like before." Vandermast raises Pompey, but Bacon opposes the figure of Julius Cæsar to him, and defeats Pompey.

It will be noticed that the contending magicians in the folk-book do not engage in such a discussion as Greene has put into the mouths of Vandermast and Bungay.

We may infer this much. Greene, not wishing to retain the French Ambassador in the play, perhaps for fear of giving offence to a powerful nation, substituted the indefinite "Emperour" and the "King of Castile" who replace the French Ambassador and the Polish prince, Alasco. The opponent whom Bruno overcame (he mentions two in the *Cena*) was Bungay, but in order to express his own lack of sympathy, which was shared by the learned of London, Greene has Vandermast-Bruno ignominiously defeated by

¹ Bruno dedicated the *Cena* to Mauvissière. At the conclusion of the last dialogue he speaks of the ambassador "under whose auspices you have begun such an edifying philosophy."

Friar Bacon. Hence, the defeat is something more than a mere following of the folk-book.

Bruno left London in 1585. The play was written in 1588 or 1589, or even, as A. W. Ward in his preface to the play thinks likely, as early as 1587.

In view of the lack of references to Bruno in the contemporary English literature, the satire is not without its interest.

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THE "UNIFORMITY" OF THE BALLAD STYLE

"It is a significant fact," says a well-known writer on ballads,¹ "that wherever found, the ballad style and manner are essentially the same." Many make the same generalization. But this is true only in the most general sense. It presupposes too great fixity in the ballad style. The ballad is a lyric type exhibiting epic, dramatic, and choral elements; but within the type there is as great variation as within other lyric types. The ballad style is hardly more "essentially the same" than the song style in general, or the sonnet style, or the ode style. There is no single dependable stylistic test even for the English and Scottish traditional ballads; and there are wide differences between the ballads of divergent peoples, Scandinavian, German, Spanish, American. There are differences in the stanza form, in the presence and use of refrains, iteration, and choral repetition, in the preservation of archaic literary touches, in the method of narration, and the like. The similarity in style of the pieces he included was the chief guide of Professor F. J. Child in his selections for his collection of English and Scottish ballads; yet he encountered such variety instead of essential uniformity that he was often in doubt what to include and what to omit, and fluctuated in his decisions. He made many changes of entry between his *English and Scottish Ballads*, published in 1858-1859, and his final collection published in ten parts, from 1882-1898. He would not have altered his decision concerning so many pieces had the test of style been so dependable as is usually assumed.

¹ Walter Morris Hart, *English Popular Ballads* (1916), p. 46.